



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## An Indian Perception of the Tibetan Situation

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**Phunchok Stobdan**, senior fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses in New Delhi, explains that “the crisis in Tibet reignited the prickly internal debate within India about its China (and Tibet) policy. The general impression was that the government had waffled on its response to the Tibet disturbances and was bending over backwards to please the Chinese.”

In this 50th anniversary year of the Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama’s political asylum in India, Tibet remains a crucial sticking point in India’s relationship with China. India’s position towards Tibet has not changed fundamentally despite last year’s violent uprising in Tibet. During the uprising, New Delhi responded to China’s sensitivities with considerable *savoir-faire*. The Indian authorities restricted activities of the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, prevented Tibetan activists from indulging in violent protests in India, and stopped them from marching to Tibet across Indian borders.

Several factors influenced India’s response. First, India stuck to its principal position regarding Tibet: that Tibet is a part of China and problems must be resolved through peaceful dialogue. Second, India thought it imprudent to damage relations with a neighbor well on the way to becoming a superpower and with which India has growing economic ties. Third, India did not consider it ethical to cause a disruption of Beijing’s Olympic celebration. New Delhi ignored the Western campaign supporting Tibetan protestors and instead cooperated with Beijing to ensure a peaceful Olympic torch relay in New Delhi.

However, the crisis in Tibet reignited the prickly internal debate within India about its China (and Tibet) policy. The general impression was that the government had waffled on its response to the Tibet disturbances and was bending over backwards to please the Chinese. The debate over the Indian response ranged from those who characterized India’s actions as being overly meek to those who thought India displayed sharp *realpolitik*.

The way Beijing tried to pressure India to crack down on Tibetan activists and even specify the type of security New Delhi must provide for the torch relay was viewed as thinly veiled contempt for India and its democratic society. For example, China preemptorily summoned the Indian Ambassador in Beijing in the middle of the night, threatening to withdraw the torch relay from India if India could not ensure security. While China later expressed appreciation to New Delhi, the events aroused new controversies over whether the principle of democracy was worth discarding in order not to offend the Chinese. The debate finally ended with a complex and contradictory feeling, with most Indians empathizing with the Tibetans but at the same time recognizing the reality of India’s need to tread carefully with China.

Given Tibet’s position in the larger India-China strategic game, New Delhi made these concessions perhaps hoping to gain some leverage with Beijing over ongoing national boundary disputes. No such gain occurred: China subsequently re-introduced Sikkim into the boundary discourse and laid claims to the “Finger area.”



**“An actual standoff between India and China in Tibet, however, is less likely to hinge on Tibetan politics than on control of Tibetan resources. As the economies of India and China grow, they will compete not only for oil and gas but also for water resources. China, as the upstream state, will treat water as a strategic commodity.”**

There was also no let up in Chinese intrusion into Indian territory throughout the summer. India’s acquiescence may have instead emboldened the Chinese to be more adamant on the boundary issue.

The crisis also provided China with fresh pretext for arguing that the Dalai Lama and his establishment in India send terrorists into Tibet. The Chinese continue to suspect that the Dalai Lama gets covert Indian and U.S. support and that New Delhi is complacent about the activities of Tibetans and their Western supporters in India. It appears to Indians that the Chinese want to dismantle the exiled Tibetan government and expel the Dalai Lama from India.

Further, diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Beijing have not improved, and China has become more assertive. The visit of India’s External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to China in July 2008 proved disappointing as Beijing showed no inclination to settle substantive issues with India. Instead Mukherjee was snubbed by Beijing when his planned meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao was cancelled. China also attempted to scuttle India’s case for a waiver critical to the completion of the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal at the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group (NSG) meeting in Vienna. In addition, China later attended a closed-door meeting of the ‘Coffee Club’ countries that oppose the G4’s (Germany, Brazil, India, and Japan) formula for a consensus on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) expansion in September 2008. China backtracked from an earlier stated position to support India’s case for a NSG waiver and entry to the UNSC.

The Tibet crisis has deepened Indian mistrust for China. By the end of 2008, India’s Minister for External Affairs openly described China as posing a serious challenge for Indian interests. The unrest in Tibet also provided India with the opportunity to strengthen its position along the Himalayan borders and other fronts: for example, it reopened the abandoned Daulat Beg Oldi airbase in Ladakh. India further launched a series of road construction projects along its border with China to match China’s infrastructure development in Tibet. Though India appears committed to its principle of non-interference in Tibet, it continues to retain the Dalai Lama, allowing him to operate freely from Dharamsala, a clear political counter to Chinese interests.

An actual standoff between India and China in Tibet, however, is less likely to hinge on Tibetan politics than on control of Tibetan resources. As the economies of India and China grow, they will compete not only for oil and gas but also for water resources. China, as the upstream state, will treat water as a strategic commodity. Recent developments in Tibet suggest that China is building large scale hydro-infrastructure in Tibet, enhancing its military capability and enabling it to pursue a subtle coercive water diplomacy vis-à-vis India.

The 50th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising could become a flashpoint for further instability in Tibet. If the situation does deteriorate inside Tibet, pressure from China on India to clamp down on resident Tibetans may increase. But such a clampdown would cause diplomatic embarrassment and domestic outcry within India. It is also not inconceivable that China at some stage may pressure India to dismantle the Dalai Lama’s establishment in Dharamsala. Whatever the outcome of this very important year, India will closely follow the dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama because any outcome in the future on the Tibetan issue will directly impinge on India’s security—and its relations with China.

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